

St. Paul today speaks of a “thorn in the flesh” that he experienced. What this is exactly, we do not know. Some have speculated that this thorn was a particular sexual temptation that Paul experienced, a temptation, not a sin. Others have speculated that Paul was referring to his deteriorating eyesight as there is some evidence in Paul’s later writings that he lost his eyesight by the end of his life. Again, what this refers to exactly we do not know. However, it must have been something pretty profound and extremely difficult for Paul to bear. St. Paul was pretty tough, as we hear about his sufferings for the Gospel. He wasn't afraid to suffer for the Gospel. In Second Corinthians he lists beatings with rods three times, shipwrecks, being left for dead, stoned, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness. He willingly boasted of his sufferings for the sake of the Gospel. So Paul, who is willing to undergo all these other sufferings, asked God to remove this thorn in the flesh. So fierce was this, whatever it was, St. Paul referred to it as an angel of Satan beating him.

Two questions to reflect upon:

1) Why did God allow this? St Paul himself tells us: “to keep me from becoming too elated.”

Paul had been given enormous graces: visions of Jesus, visions of heaven, incredible conversion. Elation is spiritual pride. He could have been tempted to become puffed up with himself because of what God had given him. So this suffering, this "thorn in the flesh" was really a protection.

The same happened with Blessed Mother Teresa. God led her into 50 years of darkness after incredible revelations. Jesus spoke to her. Then for 50 years she felt completely abandoned by God, not that she ever was, but she was allowed to feel that way. Why? Her spiritual director indicates it was Divine protection from pride.

2) After St. Paul prayed, why did God not take it away?

Again, St. Paul provides the answer; actually Jesus provides the answer for St. Paul and it is a two-part answer.

a) “My grace is sufficient for you” – in other words, there is no suffering so great that God’s grace cannot get us through. If we try to rely on our own strength, indeed we will fail. But by relying on the Lord’s grace, we can endure any suffering with peace and patience, so the allowance of suffering in our lives can be God’s way of teaching us to be dependent on Him. “My grace is sufficient for you.”

b) Second part of the answer to Paul from Jesus “Power is made perfect in weakness.” This goes completely against worldly wisdom which would tell us “The stronger we are, the stronger we are.” It is when we allow God’s power to

shine through our human weakness that we are truly strong, for God's strength far surpasses human strength.

Example: Martyrdom of St. Maximilian Kolbe. He was a priest held in Nazi concentration camp. He gave his life in place of a father of a family. He and 9 others were starved to death, and he would sing to them to give them comfort as they died. In the world, who was strong? The Nazi's as they had guns, barbed wire, they had the power. Who was truly strong? St. Maximilian as he gave himself away in love for the life of a stranger. He sang through the terrible sufferings. In truth, the Nazi's were weak cowards, while St. Maximilian was strong, had courage, truth, love. God's power shining through him. "Power is made perfect in weakness."

St. Paul was not a superman, much less was he a god. He had sufferings so strong that he begged God to take them away and we too can beg for God to take our sufferings away. But if God in His wisdom and goodness should choose to allow them to continue to them to bless God and let the words of Jesus to St. Paul ring in our hearts and minds, "My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness."

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 14th Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2012.